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ABSTRACT

Part of a 13-volume series designed to help Lutheran communities assess the feasibility of starting a Lutheran elementary school and to assist ongoing schools in current operation, this volume is intended to help Lutherans clarify why they might want such a school and its effects on the congregation. Most of the publication discusses reasons for establishing a Lutheran school with an emphasis on advantages to the family, the congregation as a whole, and the individual church member. A short section considers potential challenges, difficulties, and objections raised when starting a Lutheran school. (JM)

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WHY THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL?

PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

EA 012 093

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
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FOREWORD

Lutheran schools in America are flourishing.

Many Lutheran communities are presently conducting feasibility studies to determine if they can have a Lutheran school for their young people. The need for materials to help Lutheran congregations conduct feasibility studies and make responsible educational decisions has become quite urgent.

Through the coordinated efforts and generous financial help of Aid Association for Lutherans, representatives of the educational offices of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have combined their efforts in the development of PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS materials. These materials are companion to PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOLS, and PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS.

PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS has been designed to help Lutheran communities assess the feasibility of a school for their young people and make plans and responsible decisions for the establishment of a school. Resource materials are intended to assist existing schools in their ongoing operation. While these materials are designed to help congregational leaders, it is advisable to consult with synodical (district or regional) leaders as you begin planning your feasibility study.

The work of the following writers is herewith gratefully acknowledged: Dr. Glenn Bracht, Mr. Robert Eggold, Mr. Eldor Kaiser, Mr. Donald Kell, Mr. Ellsworth Kierbs, Dr. Glenn Kraft, Mr. Kenneth Markworth, Mr. Neal Meitler, Rev. Paul Pallmeyer, Mr. Richard Sauer, Mr. Wilbur Tewes and Dr. Martin Wessler. A special word of thanks to the synodical leaders who gave counsel and encouragement in this project: Dr. Victor Constien, Mr. Glenn Moenning, Dr. Al Senske, Dr. Marlin Schulz, Mr. Donald Vetter and Mr. Donald Zimmerman. Thanks to Lois Prahlow for artwork; Jim Reigles for editing; Lois Brandt, Harriette Johnson and Florence Schoenfeldt for typing and Trip Gesch for printing. To Aid Association for Lutherans staff members: Dr. Martin Koehneke, Mr. Fred Pahl, Mr. William Selle and Mr. Donald Stoike thanks for their encouragement and counsel.

These materials are dedicated to the glory of God for the extension of Lutheran education.

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Martin F. Wessler
Project Director

WHY THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL?

EDUCATION

335 New Life Training Center: The Lutheran School

Immediate occupancy. Complete educational agency. Proven results with long history. Thousands of satisfied users. Acknowledged evangelism aid. Programs tailored to congregational needs. Inquire at local Lutheran church.

No such ad enticed the newly established colony of Swedes in Delaware into opening the first Lutheran school in North America in 1640. And the grand opening drew little notice. Reorus Torkillus, the colony's pastor and the school's only teacher, considered the establishment of a school a normal way to carry out his ministry of preaching and teaching God's word. So did his parishioners.

Today, more than three and one-third centuries later, Lutherans continue to see the need for integrating all learning with their faith in Jesus Christ. An increasing number of them consider a full-time Christian day school as the best way to accomplish this and maintain such a school for their children. When one considers that "free" tax-supported public education has been general in the U.S. and Canada since the 19th century, such support is, to say the least, noteworthy. Church schools call for financial sacrifice, not easy in a period of rapid inflation.

Still, Lutherans in North America today teach a quarter of a million students in more than 2,000 church schools, their number growing despite a declining birthrate. Fewer than 100 of these schools go past eighth grade, but the number that do is increasing quickly. One such school, St. Matthew's Lutheran School in New York City with kindergarten through eighth grade, has been in continuous service since 1752, with the exception of a few years during the Revolutionary War.

Lutheran schools in the early days of America were most often single operations of one or two rooms and usually include all eight grades. Today Lutheran schools are much harder to stereotype. They come in a variety of forms--from half-day preschool classes to comprehensive programs from early childhood through grade 12. In between are early childhood training centers; kindergartens; elementary education through grades four, six, or eight; junior high schools; high schools; and various combinations of these.

In many cases, a single congregation will operate its own school. In others two or more congregations team together to conduct a school jointly. No one type is "right" for every situation. Each congregation determines which type can best meet its needs, given its unique situation and the resources it has available.

WHY SPONSOR A SCHOOL?

The decision to open a school is not one a Lutheran congregation makes lightly. As already mentioned, opening a school requires financial sacrifice because unlike public schools, a church school does not receive direct tax support.

So why do so many Lutheran congregations have their own schools?

Reasons haven't always been the same. In early America and Canada, many Lutheran church members were recent immigrants who naturally wanted to preserve some of their ethnic culture for their children and to teach them to read and write the old-world languages. These desires grew out of a concern to serve their children and were tied up with the most important aspect of their culture--their faith.

Culture and language are less dominant factors for establishing Lutheran schools today (although recently more attention is being given to "roots" and bilingual education). But the need to teach the life-engendering and sustaining Word of God is as pressing as ever.

"The Lutheran church has always stood for two things," a noted U.S. Lutheran leader once told a gathering of parents of prospective college students, "missions and education." He did not mean that these were distinctly different things, nor that one is more important than the other. Missions and Christian education both proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Only the recipient is different. Missions refers to sharing the Gospel with those who have never heard it before, or who have heard but have not accepted it. Christian education is sharing the same Good News with those who have heard and believed it already--but continue to need to hear it for growth and nurture. Christian education is the ministry of nurturing.

Why is this so? Once you've heard some good news, isn't that all there is to it?

Yes. And no.

Yes, because even a little Gospel can create faith. The amount isn't the important thing. What is important is the Holy Spirit, who performs His gracious work through the Gospel.

On the other hand, the need to repent (i.e., to turn back to God) is a daily matter, Lutherans have always insisted. The only means--the power--for bringing repentance about comes from the Gospel of reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ (Romans 1:16). No wonder St. James told believers of his day to "receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls" (James 1:12), or that Peter urged them to "grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).



GROWTH IN GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE

That last exhortation is worth a second look. To "grow in grace and knowledge" recalls Jesus' prayer the night before His crucifixion: "And this is eternal life that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent" (John 17:3). How do we get to know someone? Is it not by frequent, in-depth contact with him or her?

To see what all this has to do with Lutheran schools, let's compare the education one gets in a Lutheran school with what one might receive in a secular institution. Exactly what is the difference? A daily chapel service and a "religion class"?

Not at all. The Lutheran school provides opportunity all day long to come to know Him who is the "way, the truth, and the life" in a closer and more personal way. That's the real secret.

The Gospel, if it really is good news, will permeate all of life. When St. Paul told Christian fathers to bring up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4), he was not talking about conducting a "religion class" for them. He was advising fathers to nurture their children in the knowledge of (not about) the Lord. Such knowledge relates to everything in their lives. This nurturing is a good part of what it means to "feed Christ's sheep" and His "lambs" (John 21:15-18).

Of course, no external force can attain this goal. Only the Holy Spirit can accomplish it, working through the Word and sacraments. Through these means He works to change our wills to conform more and more closely to the will of Christ.

Parents take part in this process by communicating the Word of God's love to their children. The Christian school, as an extension of both the Christian home and the congregational family, also participates. And because both are involved, parents as well as congregational members have a strong voice in the conduct of the Lutheran school.



SATURATING WITH THE WORD

Already in Old Testament times God directed His people to instruct children in the Word on an around-the-clock basis. They were to teach the words God had commanded them "diligently to your children, and . . . talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

A careful study of this passage shows that this charge was given not only to parents. All Israel received it. Clearly, the leaders were to make every effort to let the Word of God permeate and saturate the entire life of God's people. Can God's will be anything less today?

The directive to "train up a child in the way he should go" carries with it a precious promise: "And when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). But how adequately can the modern Christian parent train a child "in the way he should go" when such training is to be on a continual basis?

Think about it. The increase in the number of one-parent homes and the homes in which both parents work means that children are with their parents fewer hours each day. Even where a parent is at home when the children are not in school, both children and parents are involved in many more out-of-home activities than they were in past generations. Time available for even informal parental instruction and interaction is severely limited. Grandparents? With ever-fewer grandparents living in the same home with their grandchildren, this source of instruction is also restricted.

TO COMMUNICATE THE "HOW"

Some public schools do try to teach limited morality. But they face a major handicap in the process--they are prohibited by law from teaching how morality can be attained. For example, they can teach that greed is wrong, but they are unable to direct students to the Gospel which frees from the tyrannical hold of the god of self. In this frustrating situation and with changing values and sharply divided opinions on ethical matters, a goodly number of public schools find it easier to sidestep the subject of morality altogether and simply settle for clarifying values rather than establishing them.

Under such circumstances Christian parents are finding it more and more difficult to communicate Christian faith and values to their children. They know full well that such values cannot be forced. At the same time, they recognize that, like it or not, their children are developing values through the secular influences surrounding them daily. It is in these instances that the Christian day school can give invaluable assistance by providing an environment where the Word of Truth can produce a reverence and love for God, a knowledge of salvation, a passion for justice, a desire for peace, and a concern for the poor and oppressed of this world.

(Nevertheless, the role of the parent will always be pivotal. For this reason, many Lutheran schools also sponsor parenting programs of one type or another. Examples include parent effectiveness training, early childhood courses, and sex-education assistance).

Christians see all of life as an opportunity for service to their Lord. Children and youth in Lutheran schools are helped to see how their life's work--whatever it may be--can be used in His service. As members of the body of Christ, each has a task to perform in building the body. The task involves physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, none of which are to be despised. Equipping saints for Christian service is a prime task of the Christian church, fulfilled at least in part through the agency of the school it operates.

THE CHURCH IN ACTION

In fact, the Lutheran school is the church in action, not something separate from it. The Lutheran school is the body of Christ in that particular location carrying out its work of mutual service and upbuilding. As Christ said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). There the Word is being shared. There Christ's work is being carried on.

One of the common complaints about modern church life is that members do not feel the closeness and warmth toward fellow members they sense ought to be present. But can this really be surprising? Consider that most members see each other for only an hour or two a week at best and even then have little opportunity to get to know one another really well. To say the least, under such circumstances, the church is severely hampered from functioning as a true fellowship and community.

For one Christian to witness to another or to a non-Christian most effectively, a personal relationship of some depth is needed. (If it were otherwise, we might convert the world by playing tape recordings of Bible passages!) Ask any number of adult Christians how they learned of Christ. Very few, if any, will point to a class they took or something they read. They will, in almost every case, point to another person--a beloved teacher, a friend or relative--through whom the Word came to them.

The Lutheran school gives a child a chance to learn in the presence of and with the guidance and support of a committed Christian teacher. Such a person may be present in a secular school, of course. But the Lutheran school is designed to provide one and--unlike tax-supported schools--is free to interpret the subject at hand from a thoroughly Christian viewpoint. Put in another way, it isn't just what is taught in a Lutheran school that makes education there different. It is how. The Lutheran school uses the Gospel to shape free people who serve in love.

But it's even more than the presence of the teacher that makes the Lutheran school such a powerful agent for conveying God's Word. Lutherans hold that all believers are priests for one another, including young Christians of school age. The closeness of community in the Lutheran school can allow the church to function as a real fellowship and permit the Word of God to "grow and multiply" (Acts 12:24).

The Lutheran Confessions attest to the important role of teachers when they assert that one of several ways in which the Gospel is shared is "through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (Smaldcald Articles, Part III, Article IV).

From a psychological, as well as from a spiritual point of view, these associations are important. Psychologists assert that for adequate fulfillment as a human being, one needs to become a responsible, active participant in a group. Without doubt, most schools provide an opportunity for this. But a Lutheran school offers the setting for Christian groups to form, where Christians can serve one another in love. They share the treasure of the Gospel in their interpersonal relations and especially at both regular and informal worship experiences. This sharing of the Good News is at the heart of such fellowship and breaks down barriers of race, nationality, and economic privilege as no other agent can do.

EVANGELISM POTENTIAL

One other important reason for considering a Lutheran school needs to be cited. Lutheran schools are agencies for evangelical outreach.

A three-year study ('74-'76) of thirteen Lutheran parishes sponsoring Lutheran elementary schools in Milwaukee showed that during that period these parishes added 349 adults and 475 children to their membership rolls. (These were in addition to those who transferred in or were old members who were reactivated.) Between 80% and 90% of all additions to these parishes happened as a direct result of the schools! The report of the study concluded:

There is strong evidence that the center city elementary schools are the best evangelism outreach of the parish to the surrounding community. . . We are aware of no other place within the church where nonmembers and non-Christians so willingly pay a high fee (tuition) so that the Gospel can be preached to their children. . . The school is not an end in itself, but a means by which the congregation performs its ministry of teaching and evangelism. . . While the school has played a key role in the past, we are convinced that it can play an even more important role in future evangelism work. . . The school needs to reach beyond the child into the home in order to provide a ministry to the whole person and to the entire family.

One U.S. Lutheran body with hundreds of Lutheran schools has found that over a period of several years a consistent one-quarter of the students in these schools came from families with no church affiliation. Most of the adult accessions in the congregations sponsoring the schools came from the families of these children. An analysis of one district with a large number of schools showed that congregations with schools averaged accessions of adults from non-Lutheran backgrounds at a rate three-and-one-half times that of congregations without schools. Synodwide, the rate was somewhat more modest, but still a highly significant, twice as great. There must be a reason.

RESEARCH BEARS WITNESS

But do Lutheran schools really do for students what they say they can? In other words, does attending them really make a difference in terms of one's Christian commitment, faith, and life?

Researcher Milo Brekke, who participated in the now famous study of Lutheran attitudes and beliefs in the early 1970s reported in A Study of Generations, had the same questions. He went back over the data gathered in connection with the broader study searching for answers. (Obviously, these questions weren't even being asked when the original data was gathered. So there was no way Brekke could get the "right" answer by the way the questions was worded.)

His report, published under the title How Different Are People Who Attended Lutheran Schools, showed some striking differences. Brekke found that alumni of Lutheran schools, when compared with Lutherans in general:

1. Report more frequent personal experiences with God;
2. Believe more consistently in the divinity of Jesus;
3. Exhibit more clarity regarding the way of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone;
4. Have far more Bible knowledge;
5. Exercise a much fuller devotional life;
6. Witness to others verbally about Jesus and His church more frequently;
7. Confess to a greater awareness of the presence of the Trinity in their lives;
8. Give a higher value to relationships with God and other persons;
9. Show stronger tendencies to be forgiving and personally forthright with other people;
10. Reveal less tendency to be anxious about ~~their~~ faith;
11. Are less likely to be overly swayed by their peers;
12. Avoid oversimplistic views of social issues ~~merely~~ as power struggles;
13. Generously contribute a higher proportion of their income to church work; and
14. Attempt to cooperate with the pastor in the latter's program for the congregation.

Brekke, of course, makes no suggestion that these qualities are found only in those who have attended Lutheran schools, and neither would any other fair and rational person. The Spirit of God does not depend on our educational institutions. But it is noteworthy that the greater number of years one attends a Lutheran school (at least through age 18) the more significant the difference.

Impressive as these findings are, the Lutheran school makes no pretense to perfection. Improvement is possible in some areas. (Brekke reports these, too.) Lutheran schools are, after all, operated by saints who are at the same time sinners. Any success the Lutheran school can boast--and the above listing supplies some strong proof of it--rest wholly and squarely on the grace of God.



CHALLENGES

Congregations thinking about a Lutheran school as a means of ministry must realistically consider potential challenges and difficulties:

1. A school calls for sacrifice on the part of both congregation members and parents. The cliches are still true: Anything worth doing is worth doing well, and most things that are worthwhile require some sacrifice. The Lutheran school is no exception to either of these maxims. But the thousands of congregations sponsoring schools right now attest to the fact that in most cases the obstacles can be surmounted. (See Document E09: Funding Elementary Schools.)
2. The school can have difficulty meeting special needs. Separate classes for retarded persons, for example, are usually possible only in areas where several Lutheran schools are close to one another. But services to meet such special needs can often be purchased. Furthermore, as a demonstration of how members of the body of Christ serve one another in love, in some cases (where the retardation is not too severe) retarded persons can be taught in the class with non-retarded students.
3. The Lutheran school must always guard against the danger of becoming self-centered. It is part of the body of Christ, not the totality of it. Like all parts of the body, it exists to serve others within and without the body. Fortunately, the Gospel of Christ's self-giving love which the school proclaims is a constant resource for overcoming temptations to become self-serving and spiritually introverted.

Not all Lutherans fully support church-operated schools, of course. Brothers and sisters raise honest objections to them, which need to be considered. Here are some of the main ones:

1. "Church members pay twice--once for public education and again for their own school."

To a large extent this is true. What is not true is the assumption that this invalidates the Lutheran school. Christian (and even some non-Christian) parents and even church members who are not parents often believe the extra cost well worth it. The reason: Lutheran school students receive education in a fourth dimension, which the public school cannot supply, the Gospel. How can a dollar value be put on this?

2. "Lutheran schools compete with public education and therefore weaken it."

This is not true. It is difficult to understand how maintaining a Lutheran school, using private funds, could weaken a public system financed by taxes. The only way would be if the community were completely dominated by the church, and church members selfishly withheld support of public education.

Actually, the case could easily be made that private schools save money for public education, thus making more funds available to it. Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon, speaking to the U.S. Senate, pointed out, "If the 7.7 million students now enrolled in private elementary, secondary schools, or institutions of higher education were enrolled in tax-supported schools, the bill would be an additional \$17 billion every year."

Lutheran Christians support public education, recognizing it as their proper obligation and as a way of serving all people in their community. American Lutherans maintain that the American way of providing education is through public and private schools, not public vs. private schools.

3. "Education in Lutheran schools is limited, especially after the fifth or sixth grade when more expensive equipment is desirable."

The quality of education cannot really be measured in the value of the equipment available. That's thinking only in terms of "what" is being taught rather than "how" it is being taught. Even so, the statement is not necessarily true. Most Lutheran schools are very well equipped for teaching all age levels. There is no reason why completely adequate equipment cannot be provided. (See Document E10, Building and Equipment Planning.) The real question that Christian parents should be asking, however, is: What values do you want your children to have? Which is more important, better sports and science equipment or a sense of one's place in the kingdom of God?

4. "Christian day schools are separatistic and an escape from society."

Moral cowardice can happen in both public and private schools, but need not happen in either. Sensitive teachers and administrators, like those in public schools, must be alert for ways to involve their schools in community life. Lutheran schools are not "parochial" in the sense that they are concerned only with their own narrow interests. Like the church of which it is a part, the Lutheran school exists to serve the Lord--and must do so by serving others. Anything less distorts the purpose of the Lutheran school, which is to equip young Christians with and by the Gospel to be a "salt" and "light" in their society. The Brekke study shows that while there is still need for improvement in this area, those who have attended Lutheran schools as a whole are more actively involved in both church and community life than church members who have not attended.

5. "Some use the Lutheran school to avoid racial integration."

Such abuse might be possible in some cases. However, this is no reason for failing to use the school for its intended purpose. In point of fact, a great deal of integration exists throughout Lutheran school systems. One synod reports that over a recent three-year period the racial make-up of its students remained a consistent 75% white, 25% nonwhite--a far higher percentage than in the church body as a whole.

6. "Only the rich can afford to send their children to a church-operated school."

The facts do not support this charge. In 1977 fifty-one percent of private school students came from families with incomes below \$15,000. This includes students of all nonpublic schools. True, many Lutheran schools find it necessary to charge some tuition today. But many congregations do not. Also, consideration of individual circumstances and need is a hallmark of Lutheran school administration and the church it represents.

7. "The school draws too much of the congregation's budget."

What is "too much"? Historically, congregations which support schools, when taken as a whole, have contributed more to the work of the church at large than those which do not have schools. Perhaps this is because the school is training its students to be self-sacrificing in doing the Lord's work. (Cf. Brekke finding that Lutheran school alumni generally contribute more of their income to the work of the church than those who have never attended.) But more importantly, since the church is built by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, it is difficult to understand how "too much" of most congregations' budgets could be spent on Christian nurture through a school. The studies cited above demonstrate clearly that Lutheran schools produce desirable results.

8. "The school is no longer serving the congregation adequately. It is too involved in working for the community."

This is the opposite complaint of No. 4. The only answer to it is that the church as the body of Christ in this world exists to serve others. We can rejoice if this goal is being achieved. All educational systems are actually engaged in the work of the state, for the state has responsibility for the education of its residents. Of course, this in no way lessens the responsibility of the home and the church.

9. "Children who attend a Lutheran school are deprived of the public school experience."

Of course. Just as public school children are deprived of the Christian day-school experience. Lutheran school alumni don't seem to regret their years of attendance. A 1977 report by Charron Research and Information, Inc., stated: "Those who attended Lutheran elementary schools are twice as likely to send their children to parochial schools than are nonattendeess."

QUESTIONS OF A DIFFERENT KIND

A Lutheran educator recently pointed out that all the evidence demonstrates that Lutheran congregations have every right to establish a school and support it "with top-priority dollars." Moreover, he asks some questions of congregations which do not now support a Christian day school: Why don't you have a school? How do you defend your not having a school? How can you allow so little of your budget to be utilized for the Christian education of your members?

Thought-provoking and challenging questions, those. Worth thinking and acting upon.

At the very least, the Lutheran school needs to be seen as a viable alternative--and an exciting one!





PLANNING FOR LUTHERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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